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Is the incipient Chinese civil society playing a role in regenerating historic urban areas? Evidence from Nanjing, Suzhou and Shanghai.

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Abstract

Urban regeneration in Western countries can count on a long-lasting tradition of experiences in which civil society has played a fundamental role in counterbalancing the system of power, resulting in profound urban governance readjustments. This has been the result of the increasing centrality of horizontal alliances between citizens and associations involved in urban affairs since the late 1960s in the West. Similar theoretical frameworks have been applied in China. However, these have frequently resulted in conceptual shortcuts that depict civil society as immature or lacking and the state as authoritarian. This paper will explore whether these categories are still entirely valid to urban regeneration in China. While the regime has traditionally prevented horizontal linkages of associations in urban governance (supporting their vertical integration to ensure a certain degree of soft control), there are signs of change. In particular, three cases of urban regeneration in historic areas will be used to discuss the changing role played by civil society in China. The ultimate goal is to examine whether horizontal linkages across groups of heterogeneous citizens are arising at the micro-level of urban governance.

Keywords

Urban regeneration; historic districts; horizontal linkages; community; civil society; China

Introduction

Western urban planning practices, which arose during the twentieth century, have been mainly (and deeply) shaped by opposite ideologies, either in favour of a central role of the state or of a free market in society and economy. The former has been accused of leading to centralised and 'command control' policymaking, featuring economic inefficiency and democratic tightening; the latter leading to unwanted individualistic behaviours and a constrained role of government, the preconditions of any market failure. A minority stream has advocated a communitarian and self-organised management strategy for city transformation. Overall, the tension between the state, market and community-centred planning has shifted interest to institutional analysis and communicative approaches in planning theory in an attempt to frame the challenges of planning within systems undergoing policy rescaling and increasing societal fragmentation (Healey, 1997).

The urban regeneration practice, in particular, is quite paradigmatic of such tension especially when applied to historic areas. The articulation of voices around historic areas is growing much more complex than for other ordinary urban transformations, ranging from local citizens directly affected by the regeneration projects to external societal components intellectually committed to protect the universalistic heritage value embedded in historic areas. As a matter of fact, the history of planning practices reveals the central role that heritage or historic areas have played when threatened by redevelopment pressure. They have shaped public opinion strengthening vertical collective opposition to arguable projects as well as forms of horizontal societal network densification. This dates back to the 1950s and 1960s when cases of urban renewal plans ended up with the demolition of important inner city areas or stimulated new-born grass-roots local movements, supported by cultural elites, leading to the work's suspension and eventually to the withdrawal from the original plan (Klemek, 2011). Regardless of whether or not regeneration plans have been completed, that period has contributed to the awakening of civil society in respect to urban transformations.

Civil society in the western tradition is inherent in the concept of the state. It is the organised society, which 'do[es] not exist independently of political authority, nor vice versa, and, it is generally believed, neither could long continue without the other' and can be conceived as 'a set of interlinked and stable social institutions, which have much influence on, or control over, our lives', beyond the formal authority and political control (Robertson, 2004, p. 75). In Chinese political studies, civil society is a relatively new concept that becomes fashionable especially after the dramatic and brutally repressed student protest in Beijing of 1989 (Chamberlain, 1993). This has pushed the international debate into very different positions. Some have reinterpreted the history of China through the lens of social movements and protests emphasising the 'incipient' civil society (Strand, 1990). Others have fiercely opposed such an interpretation and read the 'civil society' exclusively as a Western concept irrelevant to China (Dean, 1997). Assuming a position in between, some scholars have argued for improving the current theoretical interpretation by which to observe the civil society in China (Salmenkari, 2013). As a matter of fact, an increasing amount of studies have been produced in several fields, from urban development to environmental studies, showing an effort to understand the increasing role bottom-up associations, groups, and leading individuals are playing in the contemporary Chinese governance system (Lu, 2007; Ming, 2011).

This brings up another point of relevance in the urban planning field: the positive relationship between civic culture and the devolution of power in urban affairs when becomes participation requiring trust in institutions of all types (Dockerty et al. 2001). Thus, containment of authoritarianism and civil society development are quite interwoven, although it is difficult to argue which comes first. The Chinese system of power, makes such a relationship especially ambiguous. The pragmatic approach adopted by the Chinese government in recent years to involve non-governmental actors in the decision-making process or to experiment with participatory approaches in urban transformations has drawn criticism. The party reformism in respect to the apparent devolution of power has been understood as a way to defend and strengthen the authority and influence of the party itself, in response to the urgent social instability induced by the intensifications of protests, especially since the year 2000 (Shi, 2011). In addition to that, the Chinese governance system has usually co-opted elite groups, especially in its intermediate structures, to expand its control and soft power (Cheek, 1992). Overall, successful capacity-building at the local level in China has proven easily with a formal governmental commitment (Plummer and Remenyi, 2004) and the party expanding its influence into the third realm by interacting with grassroots movements (Thornton, 2013).

This might lead to the conclusion that a perspective by which one can observe and understand the 'incipient' civil society in contemporary Chinese urban studies must consider at least three fundamentals and interrelated aspects: the resistance of groups and associations to the structurally conflictive urban governance system, due to the complex transition from a centrally planned to a market system (Zhao, 2015); their contextual integration in the governance system (Landry, 2008); and the forms of horizontal relations within the society, without which it would be inappropriate to consider such associations as constituent of a real civil society (Walzer, 2002). However, the Chinese system of power, although highly influential, has been interpreted as lacking in systematic approaches to policy implementation and, for this reason, has been described as 'fragmented' (Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992). As a consequence, the decision-making process of Post-Mao China has often resulted in a high level of flexibility and a certain degree of 'improvisation' in policymaking (Feuchtwang et al., 2015). At the same time, attempts to understand the role of civil society in China have advocated for alternative interpretations, critical in adopting *tout cour* the traditional lesson of Toqueville about the civil society as an autonomous sphere, more inclined to favour a Gramscian approach to the hegemonic power inherent to the system of Chinese governance (Salmenkari, 2013). To a certain

extent, this interpretation has its roots in the Western context as well, particularly in the case of socially disruptive advanced capitalist systems, where the concept of 'network of equivalents' has been appropriately introduced to frame the convergence of interest of heterogeneous and fragmented groups against or in favour of a specific cause (Purcell, 2009).

This analysis, aiming at combining 1) the fragmented state authoritarianism, 2) its attempts to exert hegemonic (although not systematic) power via co-opting and 3) the functioning of heterogeneous groups of opponents, can shed a light on the particular Chinese institutionalised 'third realm' that has been quite for long under observation (Huang, 1993). The intention is to outline the potential formation of a space for social innovation and local democracy in the current practices of urban governance. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to explore the theoretical and practical implications of such redefinitions by analysing some case studies of controversial urban regeneration in historic areas in China where the civil society has emerged in different ways. Assuming the truthfulness of point 1 and 2, given the consolidated body of literature reported here, it will achieve this task by looking at the way in which vertical and horizontal integration of citizens' groups in the decision-making process has happened in three cases in the Yangtze River Delta Region, alongside the achievements and the limitations they have encountered in the overall process.

Governance of urban regeneration for historic areas in China

Urban regeneration arose as an urgent need for dilapidated inner city areas in China since the 1980s, especially in major cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Alongside a process of state reforms toward greater administrative fiscal decentralisation and privatisation of land and the housing market, inner city demolition and redevelopment has become a common practice in China (He and Wu, 2009). While decentralisation has exponentially increased the economic appetite of local officials, the season of urban entrepreneurialism has had a direct consequence in boosting property-led urban redevelopments in inner city areas (Ye, 2011).

The pace of redevelopment has been exacerbated by the particular regime of property in China. While the transference of land use rights is allowed, land remains state-owned in cities, and, due to the dual system of the real estate market, local governments can gain from leasing to private developers (He and Wu, 2009). The ambiguity of individual property rights determines a high capital gain between the compensation of urban dwellers and the leasing charge to private

developers, and this has generated a dynamic land development process for the maximisation of the land use (Yeh and Wu, 1999). For this reason, although different in nature, the Chinese property-led model of urban development has been associated with the western growth machine (He and Wu, 2005). The behaviour of utilitarian local officials and profit-driven developers has generated alliances between local government and private developers, the so-called local pro-growth coalitions (Zhu, 1999). Excluded from those coalitions, local neighbourhoods have suffered from social injustice (Zhang, 2002). In the Chinese case, injustice is normally the result of unfair displacements and compensation treatments, and this has led to increased conflicts between local residents and the government (Shin, 2008).

However, within the profound change of the urban governance structure of China, some new key actors of community life have emerged. Local state organisations, such as Street Offices (SOs) and neighbourhood Residents' Committees (RCs) have played more important roles. In particular, they have become integrated power structures of local communities and consequently 'the site in which the interests of government agencies, commercial organizations, and citizens are negotiated' (Fayong, 2008 p. 235). In this respect, although controversial, especially when affected by corruption of local cadres, they have also facilitated forms of citizens' oppositions primarily focussed on defending specific interests and extending their protests horizontally to other communities. On the other hand, non-governmental residents' representative organisations have also mobilised more local people in taking part in local policymaking, although their effectiveness has been higher in places where the power of RCs over residents has been weaker (Tang, 2015). Thus, even if the relationship between local state organisations and residents' representative organisation is still ambivalent, the micro-level urban governance structures may be enlarging the sphere of local democracy.

In addition to social instability, urban redevelopment might also cause the irreversible loss of historic, aesthetic, and cultural values embedded in historic neighbourhoods. While current literature on urban governance is quite considerable, relatively less attention had been paid to the governance of urban regeneration for historic areas, besides a few well-documented studies, as in the case of Xintiandi in Shanghai (He and Wu, 2005). However, as anticipated, the composition of voices against arguable urban redevelopment and regeneration in China is increasing, particularly in historic areas, requiring more research. This is mainly due to a series of interrelated issues:

- Overall, the number of public revolts against current development plans is increasing (Ye, 2011);

- Online activism is playing a fundamental and growing role (Yang, 2009). An 'information revolution' is leading to ample manifestations of opposition to the status quo (Zhou, 2008), where urban heritage increasingly is at the centre of media attention¹;
- There is a rising awareness of cultural and other intangible values embedded in historic quarters, especially among professionals (Ruan, 1993) and more recently by top leading political figures²;
- International public opinion is more active and concerned due to China's media exposure in recent years, especially after the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, which revealed the demolition of large urban sectors of traditional central Hutong areas (The Economist, 2008);
- International organisations like UNESCO, considering the increasing numbers of historic sites listed in the World Heritage List, are requiring a dynamic and interactive legitimisation between the local political system and multiple social groups (Wang, 2011).

As will be explained later, some organised bottom-up protests have recently emerged, particularly in historic neighbourhoods, although there still has been no solid and systematic collection of information regarding this issue. The present paper considers some cases of urban regeneration in the Yangtze River Delta during the last 10 years: the redevelopment project of the south part of the old city of Nanjing, mainly challenged by a group of local academics and professional elites; the ongoing urban redevelopment project of the north-west sector of the old town in Suzhou, where different voices have demanded an alternative model of redevelopment; and the bottom-up regeneration process of an artist district in Shanghai, where local people have challenged the traditional inner-city intervention. Overall, these voices, in advocating for the protection and a different use of historic areas, have sought an innovation of the formal platform for communication and collaboration between governmental agencies and the public. By exploring how urban communities living in historic areas engage with, and become part of, neighbourhood governance (Bray, 2006), this paper will research how the urban regeneration practices of historic areas can contribute to a general urban planning theory. It will also assess the spatial and social issues underlying the conservation of the historic environment that create contention between different contrasting voices (Pendlebury, 2008).

China: fragmented authoritarianism and the role of civil society in urban planning

¹ There are an increasing number of examples of small NGO blogs like the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center – CHP (<http://en.bjchp.org>) (accessed 20 May 2015).

² As a matter of fact, the current Chinese President Xi has been actively involved in promoting the Chinese culture as a tool to reinforce the Chinese soft power (ChinaDaily, 2014).

The study of civil society in authoritarian states requires cautious analysis of how NGOs are embedded in the governance system. The government may tolerate social organisations when they relieve the state from some social welfare obligations and state agents can get credit from them (Spires, 2011). Such 'contingent symbiosis', although not necessarily real bottom-up democratisation, implies different interpretation of the authoritarian regime of China as 'fragmented' (Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992). This means that 'central policy formation and implementation is not dictated, but is coordinated inconsistently through variable interpretations of official discourse' (Feuchtwang, 2015), leaving spaces for discretionary mandates (Birney, 2014). The decision-making, traditionally strongly influenced by ambitious economic targets, is now subject to revision. Thus, the phasing out of pure economic paradigms increases the possibilities of different policy agendas, greater accountability of political leaders and tolerance of non-state actors (The Economist, 2013).

While the relationship between fragmented Chinese authoritarianism, discretionary mandates and bottom-up associations has been explained in governance studies, less has been said about the democratic outcomes of such negotiations in the specific urban planning field. Following the strand of reasoning of Salmenkari (2013), this would be achieved not only by looking at the vertical integration of grassroots movements into the urban governance, in consideration of the Gramscian analytical framework of systems of power, but also at the strengthening and densification of horizontal linkages across organisations (Chan, 2008).

An interesting study regarding public concerns on two urban projects in Chongqing and Xiamen has outlined the power of Internet in allowing grassroots movements to raise their voice in urban planning, which has traditionally been dominated by the government and professionals (Cheng, 2013). Although the Internet-based participation process has not reached a desirable level of consensus building, it has promoted a process of social learning between ordinary people and the professional elite. This can be regarded as an example of collaborative planning resulting from the (deliberate or not) involvement of local stakeholders in processes of social learning based on communication (Healey, 1998). This particular model of participatory governance is considered a precondition for developing a democratic society (Smith, 1973).

However, such an analytical approach confirms the existence of elite groups (in this case, planners) institutionally embedded in the current system of governance. Their relationship with the wider public, being at the preliminary stage of consensus-seeking (or social learning), is not necessarily democratic, but it might produce a changing pattern of development in the city

formation. Without such interaction, urban development can easily lead to unsustainable outcomes. The strengthening of institutional capacity can avoid social exclusion by devolving concentrated power to lower levels (Healey, 2006). The hearing of local voices and the acknowledgment of local knowledge, besides the formal expert voices, has become a matter of great concern for the conservation of historic districts, in terms of capability to capture the diversity of the society (Townshend and Pendlebury, 2009) and prevent exclusionary outcomes (Pendlebury et al., 2004). The following session will introduce some cases of governance of urban regeneration for historic areas and show to what extent they can envision an enlargement of local democracy and outline the effectiveness of their action in respect to urban heritage conservation.

Urban regeneration in practice: recent cases and discussion

In China, voices against urban regeneration projects are still largely unheard, although there have been effective oppositions from urban homeowners, often motivated by 'Nimbyism', expressed in the form of petitions, protests, and campaign mobilisation through local media (Cai, 2010). However, some cases regarding historic quarters stand out their effectiveness. We refer in particular to the redevelopment project of the old city of south Nanjing and the regeneration projects of the historic district of Taohuawu in Suzhou and of Tianzifang in Shanghai.

The old city centre of Nanjing has been the subject of a battle between local government and affected stakeholders over a new development plan (Liu, 2012). In 2006, the Nanjing municipal government decided to redevelop the historic area of south Nanjing by clearing dilapidated urban fabrics, creating a new image of the city. This included the demolition of traditional houses in areas strongly affected by in-bound migration. A relocation plan was proposed. During negotiation between the local government and local residents, the Residents' Committee was never perceived as fully representative of local interest, just an extension of authority of higher levels. Its role was confined to informing local people regarding compensation issues (Zhang, 2012b). Predictably, the contentious issue was mainly about monetary compensation and alternative relocating apartments provided in the outskirts of the city. Discontented with the proposed arrangement, but lacking the proper channels to express their opinions, local opposition turned to flyers and the mobilisation of local mass media. The local elite in Nanjing reacted differently. Academic scholars and local experts (architects, planners,

etc.) formally raised their objections to the redevelopment plan with the intention to conserve the historic morphology of the area³. In this case the petition, which had addressed directly the central government, obtained the redefinition of the conservation perimeter, eventually preserving at least few portions of the historic area (Liu, 2012). Overall this achievement can be considered rather exceptional, as the influence of involved professional elites and mass media was relatively strong compared to a similar Chinese situation. Nevertheless, local residents and local elite operated in separate ways expressing very different claims.

The Regeneration Programme of the historic district of Taohuawu, located in the northwest of the historic city centre of Suzhou, started in 2011. According to the regeneration plan, the main objectives are: improvement of the area and clearance of dilapidated housing, enhancement of local living conditions and development of retail and tourism potentials of the area (Suzhou Planning Bureau, 2010). In terms of planning, although the project was known as 'regeneration', most areas in the initial phase, except listed buildings, underwent demolition, raising a number of opposing voices. Observing some still-intact traditional neighbourhoods of Taohuawu at risk of demolishment, different stakeholders raised their voice about the regeneration project: urban, economically disadvantaged groups (an estimated 70% of the local population), mainly composed of migrant renters and primarily concerned with their relocation and business opportunities; and local people (an estimated 30% of the local population), mainly composed of owners primarily concerned with the loss of their social network embedded in the neighbourhood and, among them, some historically eminent families, including descendants from an influential ancestor of the area who had lived in Taohuawu since long and refused to move (Author and Yang, 2014). In addition to local residents, other people, belonging to relevant professional groups (such as architects, planners and cultural heritage scholars, not necessarily residents) have questioned the rationality of this regeneration programme. Some local activists voluntarily recorded how the project damaged the historic buildings and local historic context, and they posted their analysis online. They have attracted many people's attention, which resulted in an online campaign called 'Saving Taohuawu' and the delivery of their idea to the local

³ The petition for the conservation of the area was submitted by a group of involved experts to the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the National Bureau of Cultural Relics, the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the Nanjing Municipal Government, respectively. This action began negotiation between central and local government, and ultimately the State Council shut down the project. Later on, a new regeneration plan, which was relatively more considerate of the existing urban fabric, was released.

authority through a government-operated online forum⁴. One major point of contention was that a number of important buildings with historic, aesthetic and cultural values needed to be conserved together with the surrounding traditional urban fabric, according to the most advanced international urban regeneration practices (Zhang, 2012a).

In conclusion, a number of economic, social, and cultural aspects have not been covered by the Taohuawu Regeneration Programme, and these voices so far, from local residents to local experts, have been largely ignored by the local government. As a matter of fact the RCs were in charge of informing local people about compensation, as in Nanjing, but also to collect voices of protest about the regeneration project. Discussions exist under the Street Office level and many local residents have turned to a local neighbourhood committee, a self-organised NGO of local residents. However, communication process between the NGO and the Street Office has not been institutionalised (Verdini & Yang, 2014). The RC has played an ambiguous role in delivering messages to the upper level, generating mistrust among locals. Taken together, with a few direct inquiries from local residents and limited information exchange between the local neighbourhood committee and authority, connection between community-based groups and institutions tends to be weak. In summary, although the project is ongoing, some actions have been implemented: an online campaign and various initiatives to raise awareness on the importance of preserving the area and the stand-by of some demolition programmes due to fierce local resistance.

Unlike previous cases, Tianzifang in Shanghai is an old inner-city area 'which ha[s] been transformed into a creative community of artists and art galleries, primarily through a self-initiated and self-organized process that did not involve a large-scale redevelopment, forced eviction of inhabitants or destruction of social life' (Yung et al., 2014a). The engine of revitalization was the self-directed moving of a community of artists in the area by the end of the 1990s, the result of a typical gentrification due to high vacancy of former industrial buildings and relatively cheap housing value. In response to that, the municipal government proclaimed Tianzifang as a Shanghai district of concentrated creative industry in 2005. The artist and business community found a suitable local context, with existing residents favouring on-site unit upgrading rather than relocation, and have established the Tianzifang Shikumen' s Owners Management Committee, a community-initiated organisation. Self-initiatives naturally appeared from the start. As a matter of fact, both the community of artists and local residents self-financed

⁴ The online forum is called *Hanshanwenzhong* (<http://www.12345.suzhou.gov.cn>, accessed 20 May 2015).

the buildings' rehabilitation and some public facilities. The Owners Management Committee came next in support of the district's improvement and to facilitate partnerships between enterprises, artists and residents. By assuming the holistic perspective of social sustainability, this case shows a different attitude of municipal government, especially if compared to Xintiandi, the other famous case of urban heritage regeneration in Shanghai where the local government forced out the local community for the sake of a high-end commercial development (Wai, 2006). Due to the success of community-based initiatives, state local organisations acted quite different from those in Nanjing and Suzhou, too. Before 2005, the local SO served as the liaison between the government and the community of artists and businessmen, as in Suzhou. Later on, in response to the local community, it began to actively assist local economic promotion and finance buildings' conservation (Yung et al., 2014b)

The data provided can be summarised in a table to discuss the role of the incipient civil society of China in the governance arrangements for historic urban areas. The table reports who has initiated the regeneration project, which is the prevalent governance model (top-down or bottom-up), which are the pro-conservation actors, which are the vertical/horizontal relationships among pro-conservation actors and what is the degree of success of their actions (Fig. 1).

CASE STUDY	NANJING (South District)	SUZHOU (Taohuawu)	SHANGHAI (Tianzifang)
INITIATOR	Municipal Government	Municipal Government	Artist and Business Community
GOVERNANCE MODE	Top-down	Top-down	Bottom-up
PRO-CONSERVATION ACTORS	Mainly academic/ professional elite (leading)	Professional Elite (leading); eminent local families; local residents	Outsiders artist and business community (leading); local residents
VERTICAL RELATIONSHIPS	Resistance/opposition to top-town project	Resistance/opposition to top-down project	Demand for changing of the status quo
HORIZONTAL RELATIONSHIPS	Weak	Relatively strong	Strong
ROLE OF LEADING PRO-CONSERVATION ACTORS	Independent	Consensus seeking via online activism	Consensus building
ROLE OF KEY LOCAL ORGANISATIONS	Marginal role of RC, basically in charge of informing local people	Ambiguous role of RC, formally in charge of collecting voices among	Supportive role of SO, in response to the establishment of a

	about compensation issues.	local people, but not performing this task effectively. Marginal role of a neighbourhood NGO, being the channel of communication with the SO not institutionalised.	successful and pro-active neighbourhood NGO, which has reinforced the community with partnerships between outsiders and local residents
DEGREE OF SUCCESS of pro-conservation actions	LOW. Some sectors of the neighbourhoods have been protected.	DIFFICULT TO EVALUATE. Still ongoing. Some areas have been demolished, although the contentious regarding some sites is still open.	HIGH. Conservation has been achieved.
Source: author.			

Fig. 1 Summary table of the governance arrangements for historic urban areas: three cases.

It is evident from the table that the current governance system for urban regeneration in China might assume different forms today, as the cases of Nanjing, Suzhou and Shanghai prove. This implies a different vertical and horizontal relationship between the main stakeholders involved in urban transformations. Implicit in the table above, we assume from the literature review provided that the fragmented authoritarianism of the Chinese state implies a relative diversification of practices, or improvisation. As a consequence, top-down and bottom-up practices can easily co-exist, although cases of bottom-up regeneration such as Tianzifang are very limited. Moreover, the diffusion of hegemonic power via co-opting of elite determines a relatively weak role of leading actors (although respected), especially when they act in relative isolation. Thus, overall it is possible to derive:

- Nanjing and Suzhou are relatively recent examples of oppositions to top-down urban regeneration projects, while Shanghai is a case of bottom-up demand for changing the existing status quo;
- The articulation of pro-conservation actors varies consistently across different cases. The academic and professional elite assumes a leading role in Nanjing and Suzhou, but in the former case they act quite isolated. This might be partially explained by the poverty and disempowerment of people living in the historic inner-city areas of Nanjing (Wu and He, 2005); in Shanghai, an outsider community of artists and

businessmen seeks consensus with local citizens (the locals willing to liaison with outsiders and to pursue in-site upgrading, as reported in Yung et al., 2014a);

- The success of the three regeneration projects, in terms of conservation of urban heritage and social sustainability, is very diverse. In Nanjing, the achievement is to carve out of the demolition area of a few historic areas, while in Shanghai, the preservation of the physical environment together with the local community is the goal; in Suzhou, it is still too early to draft a balance of the overall intervention.

In general terms, the degree of success is related to the role played by key local organisations and the effectiveness of the relationship between the governmental and non-governmental ones. In particular the role of the state ones (SO and RC) appears to be marginal in Nanjing, ambiguous in Suzhou and supportive in Shanghai. Local neighbourhood NGOs are also negligible in Nanjing, existing but not institutionalised in Suzhou and pro-active in Shanghai. This shows a passive, potentially dangerous aptitude of governmental local organisations if not counterbalanced by bottom-up ones; at the same time the system allows pragmatic reactions to effective bottom-up demands of change, which might lead to supportive political actions. This is not surprising considering the 'contingent symbiosis' between government and NGO mentioned before (Spires, 2011).

The declared aim of the present paper is not confined to the tangible outcomes of the three regeneration projects, but to contribute to the understanding of the Chinese 'third realm', by looking at the transformation of historic districts. In this respect, the cases reported here envision, to a certain extent, the potential of a space for social innovation and local democracy. Observing the horizontal relationships developed within the three cases, it becomes apparent that strong relationships between heterogeneous groups have arisen in bottom-up urban regenerations, leading to the formation of a community-based neighbourhood organisation. Conversely, in the case of top-down implementation of projects, relative strong horizontal relationships have arisen mainly through online platforms, not place-based organisations, and in the presence of more mature local actors showing their deeper sense of belonging (Sampson et. al., 2002), as in the Suzhou case. These findings show that social movements can function as alternative attempts to mobilise public voices into organised political action, to modify what has been considered unjust or to pursue what is considered desirable. Although the effectiveness of social movements is highly disputed everywhere, even in the case of more mature planning practices (Yung and Chan,

2011), they might determine 'intriguing purposive actions in the explicit effort to transform the social order' (Buechler 2000). In any case, these attempts are neither implemented outside the system of constituted power nor fully integrated within it. This confirms that in China 'state and society are intersecting and overlapping as the interests that bind them together become increasingly indistinguishable' (Wang, 2011, p. 733).

Conclusion

The study of three case studies of urban regeneration in Nanjing, Suzhou and Shanghai has outlined the existence of different horizontal linkages across groups of heterogeneous citizens seeking alternative policy implementation. In historic areas, such linkages are stronger under the conditions of merging outsiders' interests, which is very likely to increase in the near future in China, with insiders' sense of belonging that might be the legacy of the past and very contextual to specific sites. Thus, the future success of alliances between heterogeneous groups, and consequently the effectiveness of the incipient civil society of China in counterbalancing the system of power in micro-level governance systems, will be determined by a series of different variables that we have witnessed in the three cases reported, in particular to: the model of governance and whether different groups can come to a bottom-up agreement on how to change the existing status-quo; the role of leading pro-conservation actors and whether they are willing or capable enough to seek consensus among other groups (beyond their institutionalised role in intermediate governance structures); the effectiveness of local (or supra local) online activism in going beyond the limits of place-based organisations; and the empowerment of local residents which will very likely depend on regional factors, with cosmopolitan eastern cities like Shanghai much more advanced in this respect. Further research in urban studies is needed in order to consolidate the understanding of forms of oppositions (or purposive actions) characterised by horizontal linkages, based on the assumption that the regeneration of historic areas is a privileged observatory through which to monitor the changing role of civil society in China.

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